DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 466 792 CS 511 236

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TITLE	Playing in the Intersections: Teaching Composition Dangerously.
PUB DATE	2002-03-00
NOTE	13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (53rd, Chicago, IL, March 20-23, 2002).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Discourse; Higher Education; *Writing Assignments; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS	Personal Experiences; *Personal Writing; Student Engagement

ABSTRACT

The issue of personal writing is hotly contested in composition studies. Some believe that personal writing has no place in academic writing. In a discussion with Peter Elbow regarding personal versus academic writing, David Bartholomae argues that "academic writing is the real work of the academy." Elbow, on the other hand, argues that his role as a writer is someone who gets "deep satisfaction from discovering meanings by writing." For both scholars, academic writing and this other more nebulous writing are clearly two different issues that they both see at loggerheads, though for different reasons. The author of this paper agrees with Bartholomae in that she is not as interested in hearing the story of a single individual's existence, but she does not agree that there is no place for personal writing in academia, and she does not see writing and academics as separate. The paper discusses Linda Brodkey's literacy autobiography, and how she came to make writing (and reading) interesting for herself and, through this interest, came to critical awareness. It finds that Lillian Bridwell-Bowles is also interested in new forms of writing not only to use personal experience within academic writing, but to use "richer versions of texts and composing processes that allow for discussion of race, class, gender, sexual identity, etc." For a unit on personal narrative, the paper states, the author/educator hoped not only to bring methods of creative writing and language play into the course, but that students would become more engaged in their writing, as well as critically aware through writing, revision, discussion, and reading. The paper discusses the first assignment which asked students to write about some incident where they wished there had been a different outcome than the one they experienced. The paper also considers some other components of the course. (NKA)

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ED 466 792

Heidi D. Rosenberg

Presentation to the 53rd Conference on College Composition and Communication

Chicago, Illinois

March 20-23, 2002

Playing in the Intersections: Teaching Composition Dangerously

Face it: Personal writing is a hot topic. One need only look at the archives of *CCC* or *College English*. If there isn't an article dealing directly with the issue of personal writing, then are articles with some element of autobiography where the writer either reveals some personal antidote or uses personal information to make clear his or her positionality.

The question here for me is: is this good or bad?

This is the question my students ask me. They also ask me: Can I say "I"? Can I talk about myself? But, of course, I need to complicate this notion, because the issue of personal writing is a hotly contested issue in composition studies. Some believe that personal writing has no place in academic writing. Just read Leslie Yoder's account of how she comes to grips with writing her thesis in "Resisting the Assignment." She is told by more than one professor that her work is "'essentially, as you intended it to be, a personal piece'"(286). What Yoder thought she was doing was making connections between what she was reading — conditions of motherhood in the mid-nineteenth century and looking at "the cultural forces bearing on single mothers... and compare them"(286) to her own experience, as well as other cultural texts. However, the mention of personal experience was in her professors' eyes, the death knell. By raising the issue of how her experience helped her to understand and make sense of what she read, she was discounted. Because she does not remain objective, she wasn't doing the serious and rigorous work of academia.

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However, I would argue that she is. The difficulty for her it seems is the idea of cultural studies as a lens with which to interrogate literature or writing was not in the vernacular of her institution. But in her using personal experience, as well as other cultural materials to help her interrogate what she read, she was considering what the grand narratives are about single motherhood and she was critiquing them. In doing so, she was also giving voice to her anger and frustration that she felt as a single mother in academia where she felt very few understood or cared about her. While they continued to discourse about the "other," she was other. Her essay serves to show how writing personal narratives, as well as alternative forms to the thesis-driven essay allowed her to express her feelings regarding her subject, but through doing that she interrogates her experience against the grand narrative of single motherhood. Also, in doing so, she writes a richer, more multi-vocal text that is far more interesting, I believe than if she had written a thesis-driven essay. The question then that remains for me is, what is the value of this sort of writing? Should we as instructors encourage our students to do this and how may we do so? What are the inherent dangers? Will students find themselves more engaged in their writing or will I received 24 essays on my summer vacation? I contend that personal narrative combined with a cultural studies approach to writing has the potential to produce a more radical and interesting form of writing that neither approach alone would allow. In this talk, I would first like to lay out an argument for the benefits of personal narrative as experienced through experimental writing and then I would like to discuss how this played out in my own first-year composition course in a unit on personal narrative.

In a now-much discussed conversation between David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow regarding personal versus academic writing, Bartholomae argues that "academic writing is the real work of the academy"(480). While Bartholomae doesn't like "stuffy, lifeless prose," (480) he seems to shy away from personal writing because he says the "danger is assuming that one

genre is more real than the other" (485). This is seen more clearly through his example of a hypothetical student, one who writes an essay for his class on her parents' divorce,

> We've read this essay. We've read it because the student cannot invent a way of talking about family, sex, roles, separation. Her essay is determined by a variety of focuses: The genre of the personal essay as it has shaped this student and this moment; attitudes about family and divorce; the figures of "Father" and "Mother" and Child" and so on. The moment of this essay is a moment of the general problematics of writing — who does what to whom; who does the writing, what can an individual do with the cultural field? (484).

As we can see, Bartholomae is not interested in this student's confessional feelings of what she went through or what it means to be a child of divorced parents, but rather he would ask the student to critique her experience, by considering master narratives of family life through looking at what others, that is published writers have written about this topic.

Elbow on the other hand, argues in his response to Bartholomae ("Being a Writer vs. Being a Academic: A Conflict in Goals"), that his role as a writer, is someone who gets "deep satisfaction from discovering meanings by writing — figuring out what I think and feel through putting down words" (489), which he believes is in conflict with his role as an academic who reads "knowledgeable books, wrestling my way through important issue with fellows, figuring out hard questions" (489–90). For both Bartholomae and Elbow, academic writing and this other more nebulous writing are clearly two different issues that they both see at loggerheads, though for different reasons. While I agree with Bartholomae in that I am not as interested in just hearing the story of a single individual's experience, I don't agree there is no place for personal writing in academia. Likewise, I agree writing is pleasurable as Elbow finds it, and again I do

not see writing and academics as separate as either does. So, then where do I see the end of this binary?

Linda Brodkey discusses in her literacy autobiography, "Written on the Bias," how she came to make writing (and reading) interesting for herself and through this interest, she came to critical awareness. In the essay Brodkey talks about her mother's love of sewing. In doing so, she constructs a metaphor of the bias or how material is cut for sewing. This metaphor becomes a touchstone throughout her essay, as she plays with the different meanings of "bias." That is, she says that writing "begins for me with something once heard or seen or read that recurs in my mind's eye as a troubling image ... which in turn prompts me to seek a narrative explanation for its persistence. My search for a narrative is guided by the bias of the image..." (49). Like a sewer, Brodkey follows the bias of her interests. However, playing on the other meaning bias, she does not allow hers to go unquestioned as she follows it through. In fact, she believes that while a bias is the motivating factor in one's writing, it needs to be interrogated.

In her essay, "Writing Critical Ethnography" Brodkey makes clear how this interrogation may work. This seems to me one of the more interesting and provocative ways to marry writing that maybe both personal, yet critical because in writing critical ethnographies one may "help create the possibility of transforming ... through negative critique" (106). She defines "negative critique" as "any systematic, verbal protest against cultural hegemony" (106). While this may seem bleak, the idea is to consider "research is both to identify hegemonic practices and to articulate contradictions" (107). More simply put, one needs to not only tell a story, but that story needs to considered against larger, more historical contexts. One also needs to understand that the story, as well as the historical context is socially constructed. Brodkey says that when ethnographers use the term "story," they need to be more reflexive, in that they probably mean "narrative." "Narrative," Brodkey explains, is the combination of "story" and "discourse." The

story is the "what," the details of what happened (though readers may forget that someone is telling a story); the discourse is the "why," that forces readers to consider that the story is being narrated, that is constructed by someone (109).

Brodkey's bias, as well as her idea of narrative, is similar to Ellen Kreger Stark's in that her personal history influences her academic pursuits. In Kreger Stark's case she is interested in looking at images of unwed mothers in films in concert with her own family history, without adopting a confessional mode of narration. This form that will allow her to experiment with the form of the academic essay is the subject of her essay, "(Re)Forming Critical Space," which is a more traditional essay. As I mention, the driving force of her interest in this topic is her own family history. Her great-grandmother, Lizzie refused to marry the father of her baby because, "she didn't like him enough to marry him" (57). In the experimental essay, she writes a fictionalized account of Lizzie's story in one column. Along side this account, in another column on the page, she discusses the images of unwed mothers in films. Between the two columns are film stills, as well as personal, family photographs. Kreger Stark is clear to assert her reasons for doing this is that "a fictional representation of the personal, could be a rigorous form of critical analysis" (57) and that her personal experiences with unwed mothers drives her academic interests. Like Brodkey, Kreger Stark believes that the personal should be interrogated, and she discusses this issue in light of culture studies. That is, through an alternative form, she believes that she is not only writing a more interesting sort of essay, but one that rigorously critiques not only these film images, but also her way of seeing them.

Like Kreger Stark and Brodkey, Lillian Bridwell-Bowles is also interested in new forms of writing not only to use personal experience within academic writing, but as the others are interested, she too is interested in the need for "richer versions of texts and composing processes" (43) that allow for discussion of race, class, gender, sexual identity, etc. She believes

that "[o]ur language and our written texts represent our visions of culture, and we need new processes and forms if we are to express ways of thinking that have been outside the dominant culture" (43). Kreger Stark echoes this when she says, "how a different experience called for different language with which to express that experience, and by implication necessitated new or alternative poetic forms in which to write that language" (55), which, as I've discussed, Brodkey also believes is important. For Bridwell-Bowles what is important is that we bring these new ways of thinking and alternate forms of writing into our classrooms. She argues that to combat that what she calls the "rational argument" or the thesis-driven essay is to do so through experimental writing or what she calls "diverse discourse," which is a generalized term to include personal writing, language play, class, sexual orientation.

Though Bridwell-Bowles is able to show a variety of ways that published and thus established writers use play, personal experience, etc. in their writing, when she turns to her own students' writing she is met with some resistance. While students like the play, they are uncomfortable allowing her to quote from their writing in her piece. They understand she is "allowing" them this space to write in alternative ways, but other instructors and/or colleagues might judge them. Because of this she notes at the end of her essay that while experimental writing is invigorating for her as a reader, teacher, and writer, she struggles with a myriad of questions; most relevant is how she can "indulge" in this because she has an established career. However, this admission does not invalidate, but further problematizes the issues of experimentation.

I have laid out this discussion to show how I not only value personal narrative through rigorous critique, but how my interest in personal narrative is connected and complicated by experimental writing. As I mention previously, like Bartholomae, I want students to move beyond just their own stories to understand larger discourses so they might situate their stories

within or in opposition to these larger discourses. But in opposition to Bartholomae, I believe that students shouldn't have to look only at published or established texts, but they may, as Brodkey, Kreger Stark, and Bridwell-Bowles suggest look at a variety of cultural materials in order to critique their own texts. In doing so, a critique that is written in an experimental form also allows for pleasure for the writer writing the text, as well as the pleasure that we as an audience have in reading the text. However, as Bridwell-Bowles suggests, students may resist this play for any number of reasons.

When I began this unit on personal narrative in the first semester of English Composition, I hoped not only to bring methods of creative writing and language play into my composition course, but I hoped as other writer/scholars have, that in doing so students would become more engaged in their writing, as well as critically aware through writing, revising, discussion, and reading. My hope, as I have said, is that they would situate their own stories in larger conversations and at the same time we/they find pleasure in what is written.

The plan for the unit was for students to write first about some incident where they wished there had been a different outcome than the one they experienced. Also, first-year students, whether they are traditional or non-traditional feel like deer caught in the headlights beginning their first college writing course. In beginning with personal narrative, I hoped it would make them feel that there was at least issue they could speak with authority. However, while this was the place to begin from, I wasn't interested in students only speaking from that position, but rather problematicizing it through considering the larger historical/political/social contexts of their issue. When we first began to talk about the paper, we discussed not only possibilities of what we may write about, but also what might be the larger contexts. While some students had difficulty deciding what to write about as one student said, "The first essay was hard to start off. I wasn't sure how to begin," many felt as another student who said, "I liked

not having to look up information because I already knew what happened and I got to express it in my own words." Those words which are from an anonymous exit interview I conducted, show that while students liked being able to write about what they know, they were not considering any larger story.

That was obvious as we continued to discuss the first assignment. Many students decided what they wanted to write about, but few could figure out what the larger context might be. One student, who was writing about how her best friend slept with her boyfriend behind her back, had difficulty figuring out her context. I suggested she consider something about betrayal narratives, and in doing that I also wanted her to consider what were the ways she had learned about what relationships was supposed to be? What had her parents said about relationships? Were there any particular images from movies or TV or songs or books that she read that showed what friendship meant to her? How might her views be affected by those things? While she understood, her discussion in her paper was mostly a simple discussion that friendship was supposed to be about trust, but there was no further complication of this. I point this out, not to suggest that my student wasn't doing her job, but rather to suggest a disconnect from what I was discussing and what students were understanding, as this was the difficulty in many of the first papers. That is, if a student did consider a larger context, it was only mentioned once or twice in the paper. For example, one student wrote about his family's fishing trip in Canada where on the last day as they were riding out of camp on horseback, the horses shied when someone drove by in an all-terrain vehicle. He said it was "family loyalty" that spurred his walking with a broken toe to find help for his mother who had broken her shoulder. While he repeats the importance of this loyalty, it was never really complicated.

After writing this first non-fictional draft, students were asked to write a fictional story about the incident. In writing narrative essays, students are often trapped in the events as they

happened, but in writing fiction, my hope was they could play out any number of possible beginnings or endings, allowing for play not only with the structure of the story, but with the language, as well. In turn, this would allow for them to begin to understand what might be the story that is supposed to happen – that is, what is the grand narrative that they might be measuring their own experience with or against?

To further help understand how fiction might work to construct or deconstruct a real event, I had the class read "Our Time," a selection from John Edgar Wideman's book *Brothers and Keepers*. In this selection, Wideman through writing tries to understand his brother Robby who is currently serving time for his part in an armed robbery and murder. Wideman tries writing in Robby's voice, as well as other voices in the community in order to understand his brother's motivations, which are so different from his own. Most students said they understood the Wideman piece, but many saw no connection between it and their own writing. This echoes what Anne E. Green describes as she discusses her Introduction to Women Writers course, students "could only 'relate' to characters whose stories and positions were roughly similar to their own" (23). The students in my class who are mostly from west Texas and white or Hispanic could not "relate" to Wideman, an African American writing about inner-city Pittsburgh. As a result, while some students enjoyed writing fiction, many didn't really understand the difference between the two drafts, because they could not "relate" to the example I provided them with. They understood they could make up or add details, which many tried to do, but as one student admitted, "It was hard to picture it happening another way."

At each stage of drafting, students would share their drafts with their classmates. My hope in doing this was through discussion students would grapple with what their stories might mean in a larger cultural context. To further help them see how this might happen, we read the Leslie Yoder essay that I previously mentioned. While this is an extremely experimental piece

with what looks to be diary entries, pieces of poetry (hers as well as others), quotes from texts in columns in competing discourses, as well as pieces of conversations, we read the essay in class, considering the various moves she made. I know this helped students to understand what might've been an extremely difficult essay and because we discussed the format, as well as the content, students began to see possibilities for their own drafts.

Students' third and final draft was to be a hybrid essay where they were to reconsider how and why they chose to write and rewrite their narratives, considering the large conversations we have about a given topic. Because we had spent two class periods just on Yoder's essay, I decided the best way to see if students were able to connect what they were reading with their writing was to schedule individual conferences so I could discuss with each student ways they might not only connect their first two drafts, but also think about what it may look like on paper.

The conferences with students did help them a lot, as some students brought quotes, pieces of their drafts, as well as questions about how to sew this all together. The resulting papers of the final draft are different. Some students added a lot more detail. Some students brought in quotes from other writers. Some wrote their papers with chapter headings to suggest their story was a construct. One student mentioned that his story of being pulled over by the police was straight out the TV show "Cops." One student even borrowed the topography of Kreger Stark's Lizzie essay to tell a once-upon-a-time story of meeting a new boyfriend and falling in love in one column. In the other column, she has a more chatty discussion where she talks about her frustrations and anger at the moment she most wants to impress her new boyfriend she falls flat on her face. Between the two columns she has interspersed quotes. Some of the quotes are on the nature of folly, while others are Murphy's Law type jokes "If there is a possibility that several things can go wrong, then the one that will cause the greatest damage will be the one to go wrong."

Looking back over this unit, some of what I hope to accomplished was accomplished. Most students were engaged in their writing. Some were clearly excited by the possibilities of not having to write a linear-thesis driven essay. Many, though, by the third draft were bored with their topics, while others felt they finally saying what they wanted to say. In that respect, I would certainly teach this unit again.

However, I feel my most important goal, that students consider their own stories in relation to grand narratives in order to understand and critique how they read their own experiences was not achieved. While we discussed the idea of larger contexts — in class I put this as "what do we talk about when we talk about love or friendship or loyalty, etc. and where do our notions of that come from," students by and large were not able to understand how their own narratives might be constructed by these larger cultural narratives.

I'm not sure at this point what I might've done differently. I know I need to put more pressure on the idea of how we are influenced by cultural narratives and the next assignment students take on is a cultural analysis, but I'm not sure this is an issue that needs just a quick fix of rearranging the syllabus. My hope is to try this exercise again, perhaps with different heuristics, perhaps different readings because I believe the issue of helping students to think and write more critically aware, more interesting texts may be dangerous in that it is not as easy as writing a "what I did on my summer vacation," it is a vital issue.

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CS 511 236

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Publication Date: 22 March 2002

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